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SUBJECT: MORE OFFICIALS THAN VOTERS: APATHY MARKS
BY-ELECTIONS

¶1. SUMMARY: Sierra Leone's local by-elections to fill four Parliamentary seats vacated by Cabinet Ministers took place on March 29, and results are expected to be announced the second week of April. Polling centers for the lone Freetown seat in contention were observed by a small embassy observer team. Low voter-turnout and general public disinterest is attributable to a number of factors, including limited public outreach, voter fatigue, and a general national focus on the local elections scheduled for July 2008. An additional and perhaps more compelling factor is that these constituencies are traditionally APC strongholds and voters would likely elect the APC candidates. Despite this general sense of apathy, post observed that the voting process went smoothly with the many actors involved understanding their roles and responsibilities. The experience and lessons learned from the 2007 national elections appear to be sustained and this bodes well for the July elections and into the future. END SUMMARY.

BUSY STREETS BUT QUIET POLLS: WHERE ARE THE VOTERS?

¶2. The by-elections were called to replace four APC Members of Parliament who now hold positions as the President's Ministers of Trade and Industry, Transport and Aviation, Justice, and Labor and Social Security. The resultant vacancies in the districts of Freetown, Port Loko, Bombali, and Kambia will be filled through these by-elections, with APC candidates expected to win, once again, in each constituency.

¶3. While the National Electoral Commission (NEC) has yet to release figures, the voter turnout in each constituency was noticeably low. The observer team noted that the various officials, from NEC employees to security personnel to civil society and party monitoring teams, far out-numbered the voters. The low turnout had been anticipated by all official participants in the process, as well as the press, primarily because public sentiment indicated that the SLPP and PDMC contenders had little chance of winning in these APC stronghold constituencies. It is possible that such thinking created a self-fulfilling prophecy, with SLPP and PDMC candidates doing minimum campaigning and their supporters choosing not to participate because they expected their vote to have no impact on the final outcome. Like their counterparts in the SLPP and PDMC, the APC candidates conducted very limited campaigns, perhaps because they saw no need for great effort. Turnout may also have been impacted by voter fatigue and greater interest in the upcoming July local elections.

¶4. While processing many voters was not, ultimately, a concern of the day, the observation team was impressed by the level of support from the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), the professionalism of the NEC representatives, and the active participation of party monitors. The SLP, in particular, acquitted themselves well in their preparation for the event

and vigilance throughout the voting period. It was also a valuable refresher for the NEC, providing a chance to implement best practices and lessons learned identified during the national elections prior to the local elections in July. The observation team was pleased to note that the investment of training and resources in the NEC for the national elections was reflected positively in the experienced and professional manner with which officials managed the by-election process.

¶5. COMMENT: A well-functioning democratic process is the foundation of transparent and accountable governance systems. Though the by-elections received little attention, even within the four constituencies affected, the commitment and adherence to process and procedure must be noted as a success for the NEC and supporting agencies. This bodes well for future elections and sets an example that other countries in the region struggling with similar issues can potentially follow. Though Sierra Leone faces considerable obstacles in nearly every arena, the entrenchment of a functioning and fair electoral process is a sizeable victory. END COMMENT.
PERRY